

LINE ON LIFE

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Spanking Your Child *

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This week, Yuma celebrates **The Week of the Young Child**, so this topic seems especially appropriate. In the United States, the use of **spanking** to control children's behavior seems to be growing in popularity. Parents are turning away from more permissive methods and relying on stricter controls. Some people have advocated reintroduction of spanking in the schools in order to maintain discipline. However, many psychologists are concerned about the growing use of spanking and have voiced their concern. Why do they think spanking is wrong?

1. Too often the person administering the spanking becomes too emotional and inflicts severe physical damage on the child. Such child abuse has been demonstrated among parents at *all* educational and income levels. Although actual torture of children is rare, most child abuse begins with intent to spank.
2. If the spanking becomes very frequent, the child becomes "*used to*" the spanking, so the spanking needs to become more and more severe to have any noticeable effect.
3. The child may become conditioned to associate the parent with pain, so that parent starts to elicit a fear response from the child – even when the parent does not intend to inflict punishment. (Some of us remember our mothers saying, "*Wait until your father gets home!*" Do you think your mother knew about this?)
4. If both parents rely on frequent physical punishment, the child might only feel safe by avoiding the parents, lying or running away from home.
5. If only mild spankings are used, they usually only have a temporary effect.
6. Psychological research has demonstrated that many nonphysical methods are highly successful in controlling or modifying children's behavior. Among the most frequently mentioned are "*time out*" and reinforcement of incompatible responses. In **time out**, children who misbehave are immediately placed in a boring environment – usually a small room. (Putting a child into a room where they have books or toys to keep them occupied is not effective. Some of you may remember when you had to sit in the corner facing the wall after you misbehaved.) The second method – **reinforcing incompatible responses** – relies on the fact that opposites cannot occur at the same time. "*Good*" behaviors like waiting patiently are incompatible with "*bad*" behaviors such as interrupting while others are talking. The behaviors are considered incompatible, because they cannot occur at the same time. By rewarding patience, being patient is more likely

to occur. Of course, this means that interrupting is less likely to occur. In this way, interrupting can be eliminated without resorting to physical punishment.

7. Many well-behaved children and adults have never been spanked or hit by either of their parents. This contradicts the "*spare the rod, spoil the child*" attitude.
8. Rewarding desired behavior is more effective than punishing undesired behavior. Punishment only tells the child "*what not to do*," while reward indicates "*what to do*." Not knowing what to do may lead the punished child to substitute another undesired behavior rather than doing what is wanted.
9. Last and perhaps most compelling – when parents or other adults spank a child – the child may be learning something other than what the adults intended. For example, one father suddenly realized that something was wrong, when he was spanking his five-year-old son for hitting a two-year-old brother. The father found himself saying, "*This will teach you not to hit someone smaller than you!*" Of course, his own behavior was teaching just the opposite by example. By watching others, children who are spanked apparently learn that physical force is "*okay*" if you are frustrated by someone, it's all right to hit people and spanking are something that parents are "*supposed to do*." (This last idea helps to explain why so many child abusers were themselves abused as children.)

Many parents fall back to spanking, because they believe it is something that they are "*supposed to do*" and/or they have not developed more constructive methods of discipline. If you want to develop more effective methods of discipline, it would be helpful to take the **Parenting (FAS 180)** course at Arizona Western College.

However, if you cannot wait until the course starts, more immediate help might be available to you. On Saturday, April 15th, 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., the **Week of the Young Child** will be celebrated on the lawn of the Yuma Library. Various agencies that deal with children will be there to answer your questions. "*Hands-on*" activities will be provided by area preschool, headstart and kindergarten programs. Bring your children and a picnic lunch to enjoy the day. There is no charge.

* Adapted from John P. Dworetzky's *Psychology*, West Publishers, 1985, page 195.